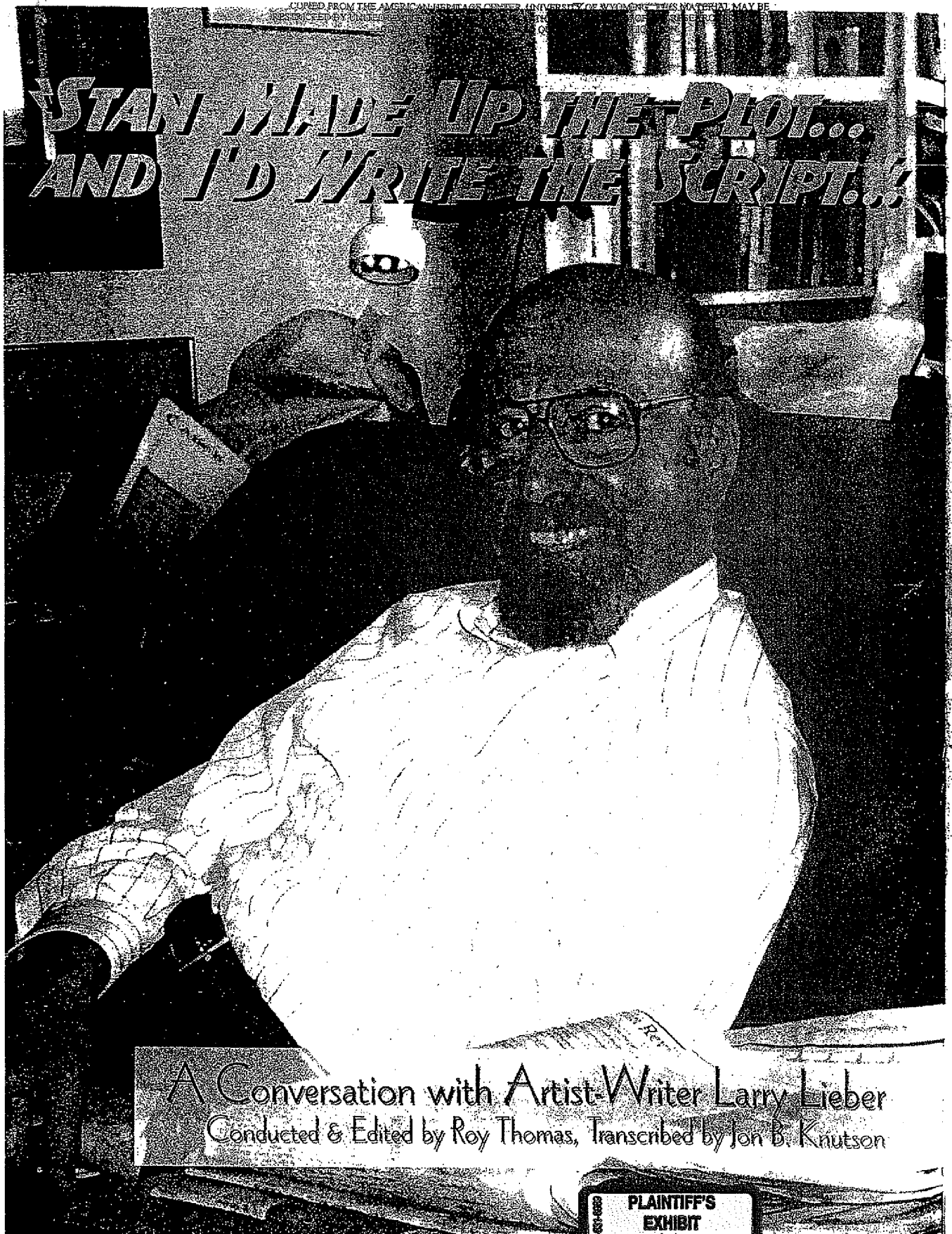


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Larry Lieber.

19

*I*t's hardly a secret that Marvel's premier writer/editor, Stan Lee, was born Stanley Lieber... or that Larry Lieber, early Marvel artist and writer, is his younger brother. The splash pages of a number of major early-1960s Marvel super-hero tales give Stan credit for "plot" and Larry credit for "script." However, what this actually means, and the brothers' method of working together, has only rarely been touched upon, even in passing. Over the years, even after becoming the artist of the long-running Spider-Man newspaper comic strip written by Stan, Larry has preferred to keep a low profile, but I will readily admit that, besides liking Larry on a personal basis, I have always felt a certain kinship with him because he was the only person besides Stan to write any real volume of Marvel stories before I wandered in in July of 1965. Alter Ego is grateful for the privilege of interviewing Larry. — R.T.

ROY THOMAS: Larry, when did you decide—if you ever did, exactly—that you wanted to be an artist?

LARRY LIEBER: Oh, God, that would be years before I was doing it professionally. I must've been a kid, a teenager, in school. I guess it was when Stan was a young man, first working for Timely Comics. I knew my brother was a writer for that company, and I was interested in comics—all the kids were. It was during the war, and I remember Kirby, when Captain America began. I remember having a "Sentinels of Liberty" card



Larry may have had a Sentinels of Liberty badge, but within a year or two Uncle Sam—who outranked even Captain America—had commandeered the metal in them. ©1999 Marvel Characters, Inc.]

and badge. As a kid I liked to draw, and for most kids, liking to draw then—maybe it's the same thing today—I turned to comics. So that was the beginning of it.

RT: Where were you born?

LIEBER: In Manhattan, in 1931. Six months later we moved to the Bronx. I lived there

A sketch of our friendly neighborhood wall-crawler, by the man who's drawn his newspaper comic strip adventures longer than anyone else. [Spider-Man ©1999 Marvel Characters, Inc.]

until I was about ten and a half, then we moved back to Manhattan, up in Washington Heights. During that time, Stan went into the Army, and I was just going to school and drawing. When I was in junior high, I tried to get into the High School of Music and Art, but I couldn't. I asked the teacher why, and he said something about my attendance not being good. It wasn't true; I was always there. Anyway that was a big disappointment, because I felt I could probably draw as well as the other guys. So I went to George Washington High School in Manhattan, and the years passed....

RT: It's been reported you did your first professional work around 1950, when you were nineteen or twenty.

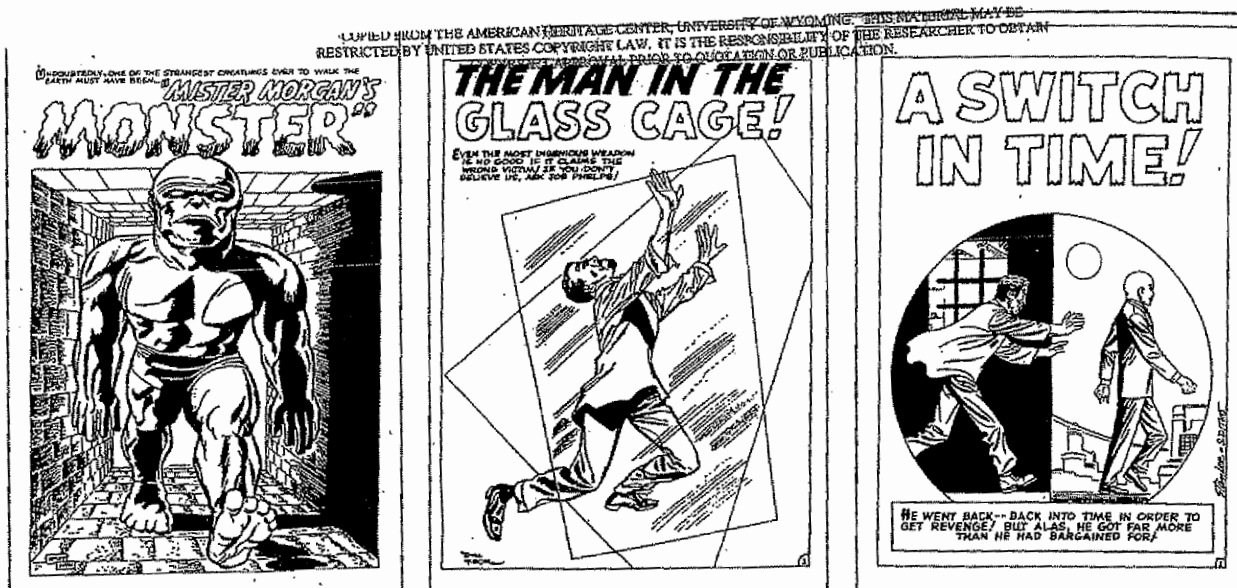
LIEBER: In 1951 I went into the Air Force, for four years, during the Korean War. I spent two of them on Okinawa. Before I went in, I was working for Magazine Management....

RT: When I walked in the door there for the first time in 1965, I'd never heard the name "Magazine Management." Turned out that was the umbrella name for Martin Goodman's company, which included Marvel Comics, which then was at most one-third of the company... but also men's magazines, true confessions, detective, puzzles, movie mags, a little bit of everything.

LIEBER: Right. Back then Marvel was Timely Comics. At the time I worked there, Magazine Management was big when the comics were big... it was small when the comics were small. At one time in the late '50s it was just an alcove, with one window, and Stan was doing all the corrections himself; he had no assistants. Later I think Flo [Steinberg, secretary] and Sol Brodsky [production manager] came in. But a few years before, I was working for Magazine Management, doing paste-ups,

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Three splashes from *Strange Tales* #99 (1962)—by Kirby & Ayers, Heck, and Ditko. Only the latter had a writer's credit for Stan Lee, so the other two were quite probably dialogued by Larry Lieber. [©1999 Marvel Characters, Inc.]

and I wanted to be an artist, an illustrator. I was working during the day, and I went to Pratt Art Institute the evening.

RT: In '50-'51, would you have been drawing or writing or both?

LIEBER: The writing I didn't do. When I came out after the service, I went to the Art Students' League, and I still wanted to be an artist and do comics, but I had in mind to eventually become an illustrator. I was drawing, but I was slow. I didn't have the skill to draw quickly, and in 1958 I had to earn a living. And Stan, at the time—well, things were bad. He had almost nobody working for him.

RT: That was right after the American News collapse, when Goodman's comics almost closed down for about a year.

LIEBER: Wait a minute—I did do some comics then. I did some romance comics. I was penciling them. And there was a point where I did writing, because I remember Stan saying to me, "You write romances really well," so I must have written some. In 1958 Stan said he wanted somebody to help him write, and he had nobody then; he was doing it all himself. I said, "I'm really not a writer." He said, "Oh, I've read your letters." So I probably wrote the romances sometime after that.

RT: When the comics were just getting started up again.

LIEBER: Well, they were putting out... let's see... *Journey into Mystery*... *Tales to Astonish*... I remember Jack Kirby was usually

doing the lead story, and Don Heck was there. Ditko used to do the story at the end of the books, and later he and Stan did *Amazing Adult Fantasy*. At the time I had a room in Tudor City, and I was writing stories for Jack to draw. Jack was so fast, and I was learning to write. You can appreciate this, I'm sure: I didn't really know how, and Stan was giving me a writing course!

RT: I had that advantage, too—as only one or two other people did—of working closely with Stan, in the mid-'60s. I got the impression that, as he was developing this new mutation of his style, he just had an irresistible impulse to teach you to write in his style, or just in general.

LIEBER: Just in general. The change in his style really came, I think, with *Fantastic Four* and *Spider-Man*. Before that, he didn't have that kind of style; and with me, it was just the principles, you know: just how you write, and "This is too many words" and "Put in less words, because even if it's well-written they won't want to read it," that kind of thing. I learned a lot of the basics.

Later on, he got his style, and I didn't particularly want to go with that style myself. I continued to write whatever way I did write. Later, when I did the westerns, they were not written in Stan's style. I remember that Kirby was so fast he could draw faster than I was writing! Stan would say to me, "Jack needs another script!" I was on 41st, and I used to sit there Saturday and Sunday, and there was the Grand Central Post Office that was open all the time.

RT: I used to take cab rides down there from the East 80s at midnight or later,



In 1961-62 *Amazing Adult Fantasy* became the outlet for the Lee-Ditko "O. Henry"-style tales. [©1999 Marvel Characters, Inc.]

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hoping Special Delivery would get to Sam Rosen in Brooklyn or Artie Simck in Queens by the next morning. Sometimes it did, sometimes it didn't. You were a few years ahead of me in that department. You mentioned earlier that Stan would say to you, "Jack needs a story now." Did you plot some of those lead monster stories, as well?

LIEBER: No. Stan made up the plot, and then he'd give it to me, and I'd write the script. Tudor City had a park; and when it was nice, I'd sit there and break the story down picture by picture. I was unsure of myself just sitting down to write a script. Since I knew how to draw, I'd think, "Oh, this shot will have a guy coming this way... this shot we'll have a guy looking down on him," and later I'd sit at the typewriter and type it up. After a while, I'd just go to the typewriter. I would follow from Stan's plots.

RT: Would Jack have already penciled the story?

LIEBER: No. These were all scripts in advance.

RT: So this wasn't "Marvel style" yet? I asked Stan recently just how that style started. He felt maybe *Fantastic Four* #1 was the start of it, but I wondered if, by 1961 and before, he was already doing some things plots-in-advance for Jack and others.

LIEBER: No, I think it started with *Fantastic Four*, or around the time he did the super-heroes.

RT: So you'd turn Stan's plots into a full script for Jack or whoever?

LIEBER: Or for Don Heck, or someone. Stan liked writing his own stories for Ditko. Jack I always had to send a full script to. Also, what Stan liked was that I made up names. As a matter of fact, I made up the name "Henry Pym"....

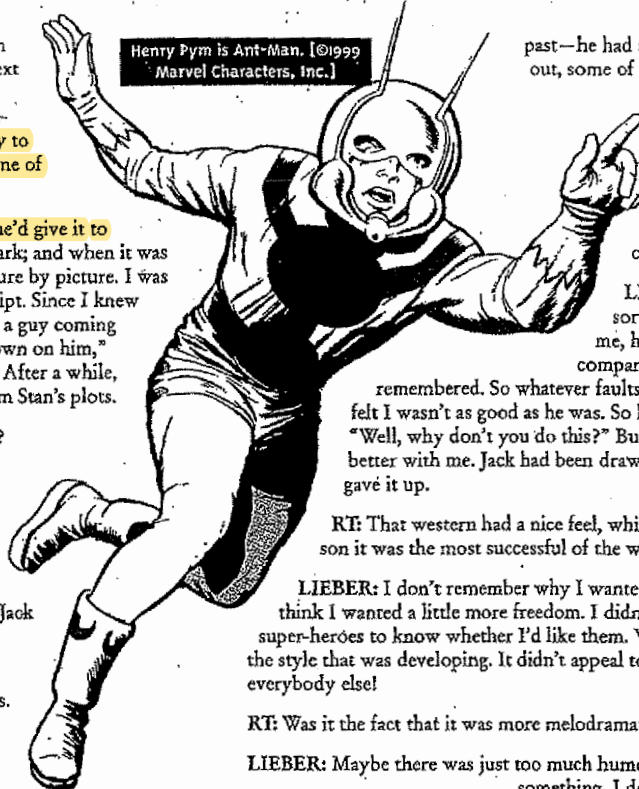
RT: That would be in the "Man in the Anthill" story in *Tales to Astonish* #27, which led to Pym returning as Ant-Man. You probably made up a lot of names that people assume Stan or Jack coined. Didn't you make up "Don Lake" when you scripted the first Thor story?

LIEBER: I probably did. I wrote a full script and sent it off to Jack. When was you came there, or when Stan started writing the super-heroes?

RT: *Fantastic Four* came out in summer 1961, and I started working at Marvel in mid-'65. By then, I believe you'd abandoned super-hero writing maybe a year before. Stan told me he always liked your scripts, but that you didn't write a lot of stuff. You seemed better off concentrating on the westerns, especially *Rawhide Kid*.

LIEBER: Stan was critical sometimes, but he knew I hadn't written before I started writing for him. He thought I was on writers he had known in the

Henry Pym is Ant-Man. [©1999 Marvel Characters, Inc.]



past—he had a couple of them he tried out, some of the old pros, and then he said to me, "Your stuff isn't that good, but you know, you're better than these guys!"

RT: Killing you with compliments, huh?

LIEBER: Right, it was sort of a compliment. With me, he had no other writer to compare me to, except what he remembered. So whatever faults he saw in me, he just felt I wasn't as good as he was. So he took things very easy: "Well, why don't you do this?" But as it went on, he got better with me. Jack had been drawing *Rawhide Kid*, and he gave it up.

RT: That western had a nice feel, which is probably one reason it was the most successful of the westerns for several years.

LIEBER: I don't remember why I wanted to do it, particularly. I think I wanted a little more freedom. I didn't do enough of the super-heroes to know whether I'd like them. What I didn't prefer was the style that was developing. It didn't appeal to me... but it appealed to everybody else!

RT: Was it the fact that it was more melodramatic, or was it the realism?

LIEBER: Maybe there was just too much humor in it, or too much something. I don't know. But, of itself, it wasn't bad. I remember, at the time, I wanted to make everything serious. I didn't want to give a light tone to it. When I did *Rawhide Kid*, I wanted people to cry as if they were watching *High Noon* or something. The writers I used to love were Rod Serling, Paddy Chayevsky, Sterling Silliphant. So I was trying to write that kind of thing.

RT: Your first super-hero work seems to be Thor in *Journey into Mystery* #83. That came out in the summer of '62, so you'd have done the script in the Spring, if not before.

LIEBER: One incident I remember with you and me was: I was in the office, and you came in. You'd been poring over *Bulfinch's Mythology* or something, and you said, "Larry, where did you find this 'uru hammer' in mythology?" And I said, "Roy, I didn't find it; I made it up." And you looked at me like, "Why the hell did you make it up?" You went and found the hammer's original name, Mjolnir.

RT: But I kept your name for it, too, because I thought "uru" could be the metal it was made of.

LIEBER: I kind of liked it; it was short. It's easy on the letterer; they're going to be using it all the time. I don't know



Henry Pym must have thought his encounter in an ant hill was just a once-in-a-lifetime thing. Wrong! [© 1999 Marvel Characters, Inc.]

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where the hell I came up with it.

RI: Stan said he always thought you got it from a mythology book. I'd been trying to track it down before I talked to you.

LIEBER: I used to get names out of the back of the dictionary, from the biographical section where you have foreign names, Russian, this and that. I used to go to it and gets parts of names to put together.

RI: "Uru" sounds like a little town in Pakistan. There's probably an "Uru" somewhere. Even after all these years Mjolnir's been around, anyone who's ever read the old issues still knows "the uru hammer." By that stage, of course, Stan was doing the plots and Jack was breaking down the stories. Did you realize your career was entering a new phase with all these super-heroes, or was the Thor origin just another story to you?

LIEBER: Thor was just another story. I didn't think about it at all. Stan said, "I'm trying to make up a character," and he gave me the plot, and he said, "Why don't you write the story?"

RI: You were still writing full scripts when you did Thor? I know it's got to be hard to remember after almost forty years. You wrote the first half dozen or so Thor stories.



Larry Lieber's *Rawhide Kid* retained an actionistic Kirby flair. ©1999 Marvel Characters, Inc.]

LIEBER: I wrote that many? I thought it was just two or three; but I remember Ant-Man. I think I wrote that the same way I wrote the other scripts, with a full script.

RI: I never knew that. Stan probably doesn't remember. I always assumed Jack broke down the stories, because that's what he was doing for Stan.

LIEBER: Let me put it this way: I wouldn't swear to it, but I have no recollection of ever writing a story that had already been pen-

ciled. A full script is the only way I know how to write. No, wait... I remember that

I did write at least one story from the artwork, but that was in the '70s. I remember that the penciler had left me a lot of empty space to fill up with dialogue, and I didn't want to use it all... so I drew in some more art to fill up the space!

RI: Stan plotted the early stories, but still, the person who turns a plot into a full script has to add things. For example, *Journey into Mystery* #85, the third Thor story, introduced Loki and Balder and Asgard and the Rainbow Bridge. And #86, with the Tomorrow Man, was the

first with credits: "Plot—Stan Lee; Script—Larry Lieber; Art—Jack Kirby; Inks—Dick Ayers." Maybe Stan made up the name Tomorrow Man, but would you have made up his real name, Zarko?

LIEBER: It sounds like it could have been one of my names. Stan would make up the big names, like "Colossus" or "Grogg"—that's a helluva name. He gave me the title, and I'd write the story.

RI: Why would Stan have not written the whole Thor story, which was obviously the thing—if anything was—that was going to sell the magazine, and yet he'd write backup stories drawn by not just Ditko, but by Don Heck, Paul Reinman? I've never quite been able to figure that out. Of course, he did plot the Thor story.

LIEBER: He thought of it. The only thing I can think of is that he didn't know it was going to be that big a feature. Remember, Stan wasn't writing dialogue for the rest of *Tales of Astonish*; he only did that for the Ditko story. When we had "Colossus," a creature of stone, that was me writing from Stan's plot.

RI: So you and he were continuing the method used in the monster books. The only difference is that, when Stan did start writing full stories himself, he



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would get Jack or someone, or later Ditko on *Spider-Man*, to break down the story.

**LIEBER:** When he saw that the strips had potential, he started writing them, and he was working with Jack. Then, I think he was doing so much that he found it was better—and also, when you're working with a guy like Jack—Jack was very creative, and wanted to put a lot of things into it. Jack always welcomed doing it, I'd imagine, to some extent. Some artists you wouldn't have let work that way. They weren't all particularly good at it.

**RT:** Some liked it, some hated it. Some hated working "Marvel style" at first, but then they got to like it, and later they'd get upset if someone gave them a full script to draw!

**LIEBER:** But Jack was so creative, and he probably welcomed it. It was easier for Stan, once he had the pictures there, to fit in copy. I remember he'd say, "Oooh, there's a little space, I can put a word balloon there. This would be good." It was very easy for him, and it worked beautifully.

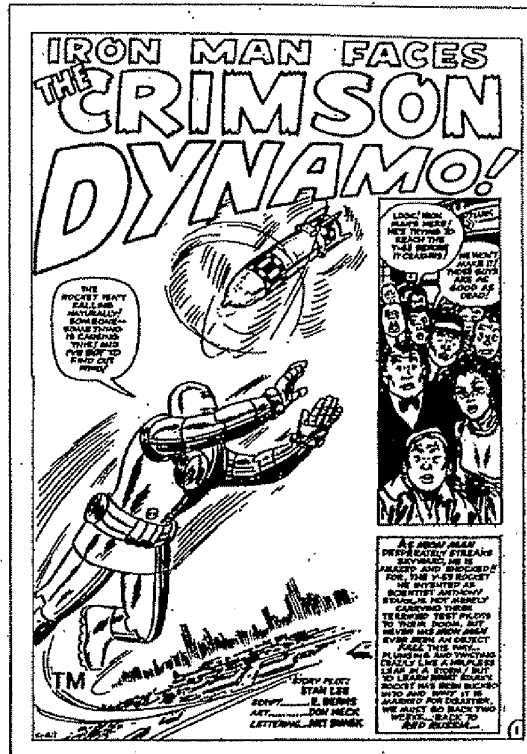
**RT:** Stan spent a lot of time with me in the mid-'60s on placing balloons, because it was so important. Did he ever work with you on balloon placement—where to put the word balloons?

**LIEBER:** Only when I started drawing the syndicated *Spider-Man* strip, years later. When I start a week of the strip, it's not where to put the balloons, but I go nuts with the lettering, trying to make the words come out. I have almost no space to work with.

**RT:** Placing balloons got so ingrained in me that after a few weeks of writing for Stan, I'd be watching TV and I couldn't help imagining where the balloons would go if the screen were a panel in a comic!

**LIEBER:** Oh, he was very fussy about the balloons and the pointers. Even now, it's "Don't put the pointer there—look at it there."

**RT:** I absolutely agree with his theory, after thirty-something years. In any particular case, I might think, "There's another,



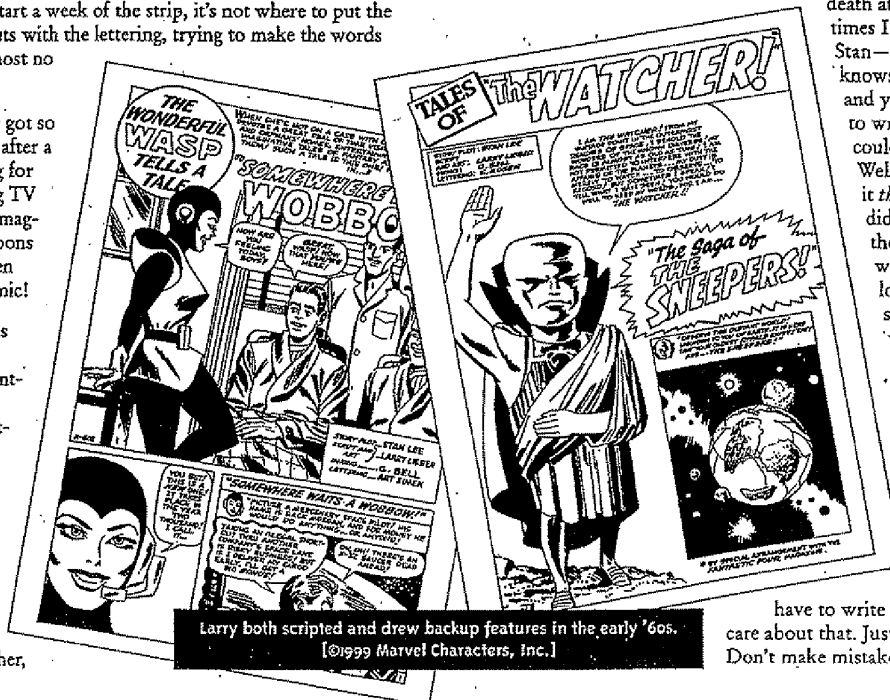
Others besides Larry Lieber dialogued Stan's early stories. Here, Robert Bernstein masquerades as "R. Berns."  
 [©1999 Marvel Characters, Inc.]

the victim, but he doesn't know how to duel, and Ferrer is just toying with him. Later, Granger becomes a swordsman, and they fight to the death at the end. But sometimes I would think, with Stan—with somebody who knows how to write well and you don't know how to write—"Well, you could've said it this way! Well, you could have said it *that* way!" And you didn't think of any of those. At least I agreed with him, which was a lot better, because sometimes you work with people who tell you things you don't agree with.

**RT:** That can be hard.

**LIEBER:** I remember Stan saying years ago, "Look, I don't care—you don't

have to write in my style. I don't care about that. Just make it correct. Don't make mistakes. Just know what's



Larry both scripted and drew backup features in the early '60s.  
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Larry Lieber

24

good writing, what's decent." It wasn't even that he was looking for great writing. Just don't write badly; he would settle for that. Also, I must say that his criticisms in the artwork were usually right. They might annoy you sometimes, but he doesn't tell you to take something and make it ugly when you're supposed to be making it pretty.

RT: It may not have much to do in every case with art, as such, but after all, in comics, you're not talking about art; you're talking about a certain kind of commercial art.

LIEBER: To enhance the story, he wants it to be this, he wants it to be that—and I'll tell you, I have met at various places artists who have said, "Oh, I remember working for Stan years ago, and he'd get on the desk and act it out, and this and that, and he made me a better artist."

RT: There are other people who resent it, still; but most people did feel they got a lot out of it. Maybe it depended on whether they wanted to get a lot out of it.

LIEBER: He may have told me things where I might have thought, "He makes a fuss over things that aren't that important." But I never felt that he was saying something that was incorrect and I knew better. He appreciated when you did something well, too; that's another thing. He'd say, "Hey, that's good!" At any rate, I'm a little unclear about leaving the super-heroes and going to *Rawhide Kid*. I know that at the time I wanted—what's the expression?—a little space for myself or something, and I wanted to do a little drawing again.

RT: Because in *Rawhide Kid* you could handle the whole book, you could write it, and you could pencil it.

LIEBER: I wasn't even that ambitious to handle the whole thing. What happened when I started doing it was, number one, the westerns weren't that important, because once they started with *Fantastic Four*, "Thor," *Spider-Man*, and all that—the westerns, who cared about them?

RT: So you were trying to work yourself into a nice corner of obscurity?

LIEBER: I don't know that I did it deliberately. But it came out that way. None of the westerns sold all that well. Years later, I would meet someone sometimes who would say, "You know, I read your westerns and I liked them." Which was odd, because nobody wrote fan letters to the westerns. But it was always very gratifying to hear that.

RT: Once in the late '60s I finished off a *Rawhide Kid* story you'd penciled and then had to quit writing partway through the dialogue. And

there was a Dr. Doom story where you wrote and penciled the first half; I wrote and Frank Giacoia penciled the second half, probably because you were busy on the westerns. Did you always like westerns in particular?

LIEBER: Not particularly, but I did like them more than super-heroes, because I felt the western was a real story, and the super-heroes were more fanciful. The westerns were more grounded in reality, at least more grounded in reality than a guy who could fly. I liked that, and I tried to make it as real as I could. If I were writing it, I tried to make it a combination of *Wuthering Heights* and *High Noon* if I could, and I was just limited by my own abilities.

RT: You did the Human Torch series in the beginning, didn't you?

LIEBER: Yes, I did a few with Johnny Storm. I'd forgotten that. Somewhere along the way, I also did *The Watcher*.

RT: I remember my favorite of all the Ant-Man stories was the one with The Scarlet Beetle, who was a giant insect with super-human intelligence. You always signed your name "Larry Lieber," except in one case you signed "L.D. Lieber."

LIEBER: "D" is my middle initial. Maybe there wasn't room to sign my full name.

RT: A bit later, you started doing backup features in *Tales to Astonish*, after Ant-Man became Giant-Man. You were writing mystery stories, but you also started increasingly drawing those stories. This would have been '63 or '64, before you did *Rawhide Kid*. There were some five-page Wasp and Watcher stories. It was as if Stan realized the day of the backup was ending, and that one way to extend it was to have "Tales of the Watcher," who of course was a character from *Fantastic Four*. So all of a sudden the comics have the same backup stories as before, except now The Watcher is narrating them.

LIEBER: I don't remember much about them. I did them, but I don't remember my feelings and attitudes, because it was sort of a transition between my early years when I did *Tales to Astonish* and the like, and doing *The Rawhide Kid*.

RT: You even inked one or two of those stories.

LIEBER: I wasn't very good at it. I didn't like doing it.

RT: One of the strangest inkers you had was Matt Fox.

LIEBER: I hated that stuff! Oh, God, and years later, I learned that Matt Fox is considered one of the greats by some people, and his artwork brings a buck or two.



In the case of Iron Man, Larry shared credit from the start (in *Tales of Suspense* #39) with Stan Lee and Don Heck. [©1999 Marvel Characters, Inc.]

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John Romita quickly became the best-selling Spider-Man artist. This poster was done in 1979 for *Scholastic* magazine. [©1999 Marvel Characters, Inc.]

RT: Yeah, but not in comics.

**LIEBER:** I hated his stuff because I struggled with drawing, and I was trying to make the drawings look as real as humanly possible, and I had a tough time. I remember I once had Don Heck inking me on a five-



page western, and I remember saying, "My God, he's good at making my stuff look better than it is," and he was. Matt Fox—if my stuff was a little stiff, he made it even stiffer; he made it look like wood cuttings!

**RT:** Fox had been in advertising. He'd done lithographs, pulp illustrations; evidently he did some covers for *Weird Tales*, the magazine that published H.P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard, including Conan, back in the '30s. Fox did color wood cuts; he was a real artist, but his comic inking



Though pulp fans may have collected his work, Larry detested the heavy inking style of Matt Fox. These two panels are from *Strange Tales* #110 (1963), the same issue which saw the debut of Dr. Strange. [©1999 Marvel Characters, Inc.]

was so strange—his line just deadened everything.

**LIEBER:** One of my traits was that I was reluctant to say anything bad about anybody, because everybody has to earn a living. I wouldn't complain, no matter who they put on. But one day I was working in the office penciling a western, and Stan walked by. He saw my pencils and he said, "This is your penciling?" And I said, "Yeah." Stan said, "This is pretty good. I've been looking at the finished stuff, and that looks terrible." And he removed that inker—it wasn't Matt Fox—and gave me a better one. But I, of my own volition, wouldn't say a word about it.

RT: Fox obviously had a style that just didn't translate well into comics.

**LIEBER:** Then there was a period—I don't know when it was—when I just did writing. But maybe that came after the westerns, because I had the experience of writing scripts for different artists.

RT: Well, I know in the early '70s we had these mystery stories. And you were sort of a liaison working with some of the writers for a while there, too.

**LIEBER:** I learned there's no script that is so good it can't be ruined by somebody. Once I was doing a western script, and my artistic inspiration as always was Jack Kirby. When Kirby drew something, he made it as interesting as you could get. I had Indians chasing the hero. I figured this would be colorful on the title splash, thinking the way Kirby would do it. He would do an Indian, and it wouldn't matter if it was the correct tribe...

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RT: He wasn't a researcher, but he was always dramatic.

LIEBER: It looked like Cecil B. DeMille, right? Okay, this artist gives me the hero riding his horse—and between the hero and the Indians he puts smoke and dusk from the horses. Over the dust there are a few feathers! That's when I realized, as I was sitting there racking my brain, that no script is artist-proof.

RT: I remember Sol Brodsky telling me of a case where an artist penciled a bunch of cavalymen on horses in the background, and the inker put a huge hill in between most of them and the reader, so he only had to ink a couple of horses coming around it. But that would be very frustrating to you as a writer, to feel your story is being judged on something you didn't intend. Now, you also did the finished script for the very first Iron Man story. Did you name Tony Stark, too?

LIEBER: That I remember.

RT: And you did the first handful of stories, when he was in the big, chunky armor. Would you have done a full script on that, too, from a plot by Stan?



Larry Lieber covers for two of the 1975 Atlas titles he also edited. [©1975 Atlas Comics]

RT: Sometimes your name *wouldn't* be on a story. Then, after two or three stories in a series, the credits would gradually start creeping in, and your name would be on the stories, so fans would sort of work back from that. Back then, Stan didn't sign all the stories, either. There'd be issues with super-hero stories up front, but only the

LIEBER: Yes. Every one.

RT: One reason I'm curious about that is that, although Don Heck is the only person listed as artist for that first Iron Man story, some people believe Kirby laid it out, and I just wondered if that was all Don.

LIEBER: I don't know. I think I recall Jack having something to do with it, but all I really know is that if my name was on it, then I wrote it. I'm safe there.



For a year in 1974-'75 Martin Goodman's Atlas Comics flooded the field with both color and black-&-white comics, as shown by this house ad drawn by Ernie Colon. Can you name all the heroes? We didn't think so. [©1999 Atlas Comics.]

backup Lee and Ditko story had credits.

LIEBER: When I was doing the stories, I remember Stan telling me, "Jack can do five pages a day of these monster-story pencils... no, six pages a day. When he does a western, he can only do five a day, because of the gunbelts." The gunbelts slowed him down or whatever.

RT: Not even the horses? The *gunbelts*? Anyway, in 1964 or '65, the staff started to increase. First Sol came on staff as production manager....

LIEBER: When you started there, where were we? On 57th Street?

RT: It was on Madison Avenue.

LIEBER: Madison Avenue, near the bank on 57th Street. Okay. When I started, we were a couple of blocks up, on 60th Street. That's the place where I said there was no room, when Stan worked in this little alcove.

RT: Magazine Management was always moving around. I remember someone joking that the company moved up and down Madison Avenue, depending on how much walking Martin Goodman's doctor told him to do. When I arrived in '65, Stan had a nice big office that took up at least half the space that was given over to Marvel. Did you ever consider inking other artists?

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Here's  
What's  
Happening  
With

**ATLAS**

Letters page heading featuring new color comics editor Larry Lieber.

**LIEBER:** I inked a page of Kirby once, in a book which had different feature pages, puzzles and so forth. I did ink years ago, when I started... I'm going way back, before I was in the service in '51. It was *Tessie the Typist*, I think. As a matter of fact, around then, I did some teenage inking, *Millie the Model* or *Tessie* or something like that for a while. I was never very confident about my inking. I was always spilling the ink bottle. I only started inking "for real" when I started doing the *Spider-Man* strip some years ago.

**RT:** Steve Ditko left around the end of '65, beginning of '66. You were soon working on the *Amazing Spider-Man Annual*.

**LIEBER:** I remember doing a couple of annuals of *Spider-Man*. Here's a story: The way Ditko drew didn't appeal to me. I thought his stuff was very stiff, you know what I mean? I did like the way John Romita drew, which was very pretty and flowing and so on with the figures. So at that time I did a lot of my drawing in the office, and I was drawing under John's direction. Do you remember those days? People would comment about it, I think—my showing John every picture I was drawing.

**RT:** John very quickly became a sort of informal assistant art director to Stan.

**LIEBER:** So I get all through with a *Spider-Man* story and I bring it in, and Stan looks at it and says, "I like it. It's got that nice ugly feel that Ditko had!" So, no matter what I drew, there was a lot of frustration. I was trying to get away from it, but I couldn't. Ditko in his own way is actually very good, but I just felt it wasn't the kind of drawing I wanted to do.

**RT:** As good as Ditko was and is—and I've been a big fan of his since his *Captain Atom* days at Charlton—within six months after Romita became the artist, *Spider-Man* finally passed *Fantastic Four* in sales. It had been gradually creeping up in sales, and it might have become #1 under Ditko, but it was only #2 until Romita took it over. He had that golden touch. Earlier, when he'd taken over *Daredevil* from Wally Wood, it had instantly shot up to be Marvel's best seller in percentage terms. John didn't have as much overt style by the '60s as when he'd been doing his half-Kirby, half-Caniff *Captain America* in the '50s—that style had sort of been washed out of him doing love comics at DC—but he drew dramatically, he told a great story, and he did pretty people. And the readers really responded to that.

**LIEBER:** Yes, he did attractive people, he told a story, and also he could work with Stan very well. He knew what Stan wanted. He was very good. And he was busy later fixing up everybody else.

**RT:** By the early '70s, of course, Martin Goodman had sold Marvel, and in '74 he started his own competing line. I know you and Stan were related to Goodman by marriage, so of course you'd known him forever. How did you come to work for Goodman at his new company?

**LIEBER:** I was working for Marvel, but I had difficulty sometimes getting work. It wasn't a very easy period. They needed super-hero reprint covers, and I could do them somewhat in Kirby's style. And then Martin Goodman went into business.

**RT:** Right. Seaboard, a.k.a. Atlas. You were one of two editors there... you and Jeff Rovin.

**LIEBER:** That was a very tacky business. Maybe I shouldn't go into it.

**RT:** I don't know much about it. But Atlas was certainly paying great rates, because Goodman wanted to get everybody away from Marvel if he could, I guess. I'm not asking you to bad-mouth

anybody, Larry, because Atlas was a job like everything else. I do remember that Stan appreciated the fact that you came in and told him you'd accepted an editing job at Atlas, because you knew there were bad feelings between Stan and Goodman at that stage.

**LIEBER:** I told him. There had been a period where I couldn't get any work at Marvel, and I had to go to National. And National wouldn't give me work because they were mistrustful....

**RT:** It's amazing you couldn't get more work going at Marvel.

**LIEBER:** It wasn't such a nice thing, but I won't go into it. I don't want to go into all the Atlas thing, except to tell you this, which was a basic fact: When I went there, Martin put out two kinds of books. He was putting out color comics, and he was also going to put out black-&-white comics like Warren and Marvel. Now, I knew nothing about black-&-white comics, right? My only experience was in the color comics. And Jeff Rovin came from Warren, and he knew nothing about



Atlas definitely did attract some top talent for a brief time, among them  
Archie Goodwin and Alex Toth. [©1999 Atlas Comics.]

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color comics. And Martin unfortunately put Jeff in charge of all the color comics, and put me in charge of the black-&-white books.

RT: That is a backward approach.

LIEBER: It was an unfortunate thing, and basically what happened was that Jeff's books didn't turn out so well.

RT: But there sure were a lot of them!

LIEBER: Yes. And, as you said, Martin had to pay high freelance rates, because otherwise nobody would work for a new and unproven company.

RT: You know, Chip [Martin Goodman's son, who had briefly been Marvel's publisher] offered me a job at Atlas as an editor. I had nothing against Jeff Rovin, but I just had a feeling that to step into the middle of that situation would be more trouble than it could possibly be worth—even in the unlikely event that Atlas was going to last longer than a year or two.

LIEBER: It didn't work out too well, and Jeff finally left angrily or something, and I had to take over all his books. At this point, business was bad, and I tried to do what I could. One of the things I had to do was to cut rates and tell people they were going to make less money, which was not an enviable position. I had one guy, who's probably gone by now—a nice guy, but he had a drinking problem, and was also a gun collector.

RT: Great combination.

LIEBER: And he was going to come in, and I had to tell him that we weren't going to give him work! It was quite an experience. But in the end it was just that Martin lost too much money. There was nothing I could do to help out. I wasn't a genius, too much was lost, and so they gave it all up, except for *Swank* [a *Playboy* imitation] and a couple of magazines, and Chip would continue with them.

RT: Any other funny stories you can tell me for print?

LIEBER: I'll tell you one because it's only about me: Near the end, Atlas was maybe going to go out of business, and I got called on jury duty. At that time, I used to sometimes get anxiety attacks, and I used to take Valium to prevent the attack. So when I had to go down to the jury, I called up the company and I said, "Are we still in business?" And the secretary said, "I don't know; Chip hasn't made up his mind yet," or "Mr. Goodman hasn't made up his mind yet; just keep in touch with us and you'll find out."

So here I'm going—it's like a Woody Allen thing—I'm going on jury duty, I'm nervous to begin with, and I'm trying to keep calm, and during a break on the jury I call up and the secretary says, "Tomorrow morning, before you go on jury duty, or after, will you stop up and see

Chip?" Now, I get off the phone; she hasn't told me what it's about, but I figure, "I bet this means they're going out of business." So I start getting very nervous, and I go back in the jury box, and a policeman is testifying, and as he starts talking, I'm so panicky about going out of business that I think I'm going to scream. I just remember being there, thinking, "I don't want to scream and cause a mistrial." And sure enough, I was right. When I went back there to see Chip, he said Atlas was going out of business.

RT: Maybe if they had just done a few titles and nursed them along. But they tried to enter the field with thirty, forty books right away, and as a result they couldn't—

LIEBER: It was more than that. For instance, Jeff put out one issue which had a very dull cover, all gray. A zombie coming out of the water. And when it was mentioned to him that this was a dull cover, his reasoning was, "That's why it'll stand out, because all the books are brightly colored in the store, and if you have one in gray, it'll stand out." It didn't work out that way.

RT: Did you find it easy to come back to Marvel when Atlas folded?

LIEBER: What happened was, Martin and Chip gave me six months' severance pay. I was trying other things; I was trying to make up a newspaper strip... and after a while, Stan offered me a job as editor of Marvel's British department. I remember that the previous editor had given demerits to people. He'd say, "Frank Giacoia is late," and he'd tell him, "You're getting a blue dot," or "a yellow dot." Can you imagine how Frank reacted to getting a dot? Still, it was a nice department, and gee, the people and names I haven't thought of in years. Duffy...?

RT: Duffy Vohland. And Dave Kraft.

LIEBER: Yes. Mike Esposito came in occasionally, and Danny Fingerth. And Bob Budiansky. They became my assistants. The only thing in that department we did that was original was *Captain Britain*. Buscema drew it at first, and Tom Palmer inked it. And during that time, in the late '70s—that's when Stan had *Spider-Man* come out in the newspaper.

RT: So how was it you eventually wound up penciling the *Spider-Man* strip?

LIEBER: Well, even when John Romita did it, I was helping a little sometimes. Jim Shooter sometimes did breakdowns for Stan for the script, and after Jim, I did some, also. I sat in on story conferences with John and Stan.

RT: Later there was Fred Kida, and different people...

LIEBER: Kida, right. In the early days, there was also a *Hulk* strip.

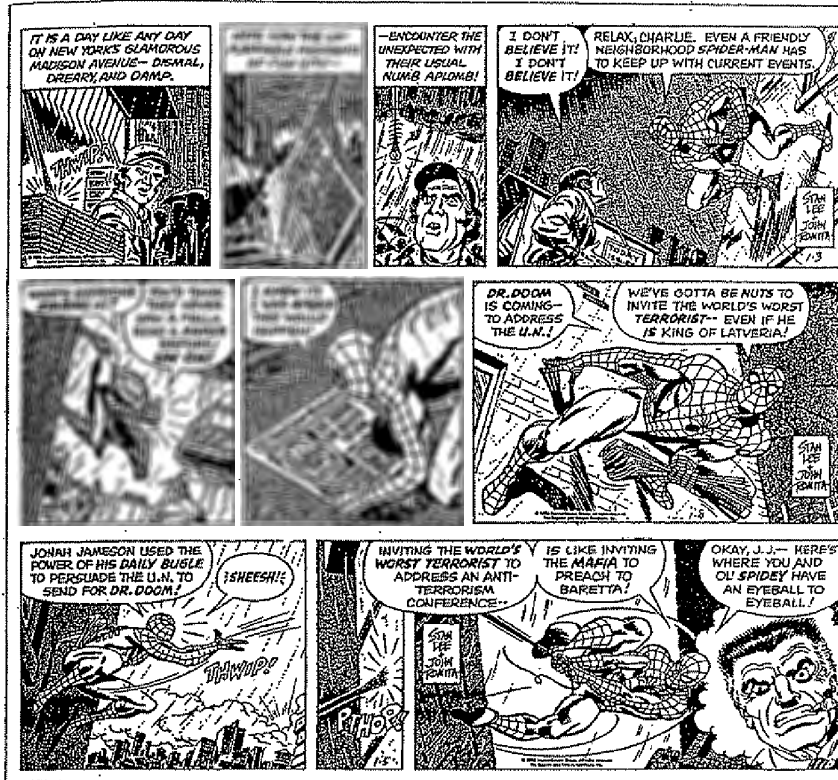


What's in a name? All Captain Britain stories were totally produced in the U.S. [©1999 Marvel Characters, Inc.]



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29



the television, because I didn't want to duplicate anything. Later on, I did a story down South with a werewolf and The Hulk that was interesting.

And then finally the strip died. I remember there was a point where they wanted me to pencil the *Spider-Man* dailies, and I tried, but I wasn't fast enough, and I gave it up. Then I was doing *Spider-Man* Sunday pages for a while, and then that stopped. Stan left for California, and Jim Shooter was there...

RT: He became editor-in-chief at the very end of '77.

LIEBER: I was having a very tough time because he wanted a kind of drawing that was difficult for me to do. You know, different artists tell stories in different ways. Me, I was pretty good with closeups. I wasn't good if you gave me a scene with forty people in it, big things like Kirby would make all interesting and wonderful. If I did it, it might look a little dull. Yet Jim wanted those kinds of shots, full shots. It was difficult, and I was slow, and I struggled with it,

Left: John Romita was the first artist of the *Spider-Man* daily strip. Here are the first three dailies from January 3-5, 1977. [©1999 Marvel Characters, Inc.]

Right: For a while Larry Lieber wrote and penciled, and Frank Giacoia inked, the *Incredible Hulk* newspaper strip. Here's a three-day continuity, dated January 11-13, 1979. [©1999 Marvel Characters, Inc.]

RT: Right. I was part of that period, too. *Conan the Barbarian* started in newspapers at the same time as *Spider-Man* and *Hulk*, and a little before *Howard the Duck*. I have a complete collection of the early dailies of all four strips. I told the Des Moines syndicate I needed them for "research."

LIEBER: I remember doing *The Hulk*, with Frank Giacoia inking. I recall we had problems because Frank was late, and we tried other inkers on it, and maybe I was late doing it. And then there was a point where it wasn't selling that well, or Stan didn't want to bother with it, and he let me write it.

So I started writing and drawing it, and Frank was inking it again. I enjoyed that very much. I remember doing a story about a boxer and The Hulk, and I was very inspired by what was on television, with Bill Bixby. I remember going out with a camera, getting photographs to try to make the strip look authentic. They had just come out with VCRs then, and I would have my late wife, before we were married (I guess it was), tape it for me off



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Stan gives me full scripts, which tell me exactly what to do. Stan is very good at visuals, thinking what would look good. I'm only glad that Peter Parker or Spider-Man only has two arms, because if he had more, Stan would have something for him to do with

every arm every day!

RT: Yeah. When Stan did give Spidey four extra arms in the last panel of *Spider-Man* #100, he turned #101 over to me and I had to write those issues! So I know what you mean. If Peter had several arms, Stan would say, "Well, the left hand is doing this, and the right hand is doing that...."

**LIEBER:** "He's going out the door, he's putting on his hat, he's turning

**PANEL 1:** CH, LERENOM, YOU'RE SO LUCKY YOU'RE NOT IN LOVE WITH A SUPERHERO!

**PANEL 2:** EVERY TIME PETER WEB-SWINGS AWAY, I WORRY SO!

**PANEL 3:** HE WAS SO ANGRY THIS MORNING! WHO KNOWS WHAT HE MAY DO!

**PANEL 4:** OKAY, WORLD, HERE'S WHERE YOU LEARN THAT A SPIDER CAN STRIKE BACK!

**PANEL 5:** IT'LL BE MY ULTIMATE TRIUMPH! THE UNMASKING OF SPIDER-MAN!

**PANEL 6:** MISS BRANT! PHONE THE MAYOR, THE CHIEF OF POLICE, THE CITY COUNCIL!

**PANEL 7:** AND GET A PHOTOGRAPHER IN HERE!

**PANEL 8:** --ARE POWERLESS TO STOP THIS SO-CALLED ROBO-CROOK WHO HAS BEEN TERRORIZING THE CITY FOR DAYS! IT'S UNBELIEVABLE! EVEN THE POLICE CAN'T STOP HIM!

**PANEL 9:** HOW DO YOU STOP SOMETHING THAT WEAPONS CAN'T HURT?

**PANEL 10:** I DON'T KNOW, HONEY.

**PANEL 11:** BUT MAYBE SPIDER-MAN CAN FIND OUT!

**PANEL 12:** OKAY, MAN, OPEN THE BAG!

**PANEL 13:** DON'T NOBODY SNEEZE, OR NOTHING!

**PANEL 14:** THIS STUFF MAKES ME NERVOUS!

**PANEL 15:** EXPLOSIVES! THEY INTEND TO BLOW THE VAULT DOOR!

**LIEBER:** It is! I've been drawing *Spider-Man* longer than anyone else.

**RT:** How did you manage to come to terms with turning out six dailies a week? That may not sound like a lot to some people, but it really is.

**LIEBER:** I did even better than that, because after a while I wanted to do my own inking. I wasn't really that experienced as an inker, but I wanted to do it because I felt that only I could keep what I put in the pencils. There are certain inkers who would have enhanced what I drew, but I wasn't getting that kind of inking. I did that for a few years, but it was very hard. I'd end up sitting up all night inking it out, and I was always afraid, because you've got that deadline there from the syndicate. So finally they said, "No, let's have somebody else," and I agreed. And they said, "When you get caught up, Larry, you can do it again." Well, Larry has never gotten that far ahead!

R.I: But still, that's a pretty good amount to do every week.

**LIEBER:** You know, people will say to me, "How many hours do you put in to work that way?" A year and a half ago, my wife died. I was married for almost seventeen years. And since then it's been a bit harder for me, getting the work out. I work alone here in the apartment, except for my

For a time in the late '80s/early '90s Larry not only penciled but even inked the *Spider-Man* dailies. From top: December 29, 1988; May 26, 1989; May 11, 1990; and February 1, 1991. [©1999 Marvel Characters, Inc.]

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around with a wry smile—not just an ordinary smile, but a *wry* smile... and Mary Jane, who looks at....” But of course we’ve only got one picture that I can draw in any one panel.

RT: At least you’ve got three panels a day! *Mary Worth* a few years ago went to two, and now there’s nothing in the stories at all!

LIEBER: I like the stories, and it’s challenging. I’m just glad it keeps going, so I have work.

RT: *Spider-Man* has been going for about twenty years now. They should do more collections of the strip. It’s one of the few success stories among dramatic comic strips in recent years. They tried bringing back *Terry and the Pirates*... *Zorro*... *Tarzan*... and none of them really worked, but somehow *Spider-Man* does! Do you think it’s partly because of the emphasis on Peter Parker’s life, instead of the super-heroics?

LIEBER: Maybe so. Stan does put a lot of that in there. They’re always talking about *Spider-Man*, but there are periods where there’s a lot of Peter Parker. As a matter of fact, one of the things about the strip that makes it a little hard is because there’s Peter Parker and Mary Jane, and so he’s writing it like a romance strip... you know, the pretty girl, the good-looking guy... and then it shifts to the villains, and *Spider-Man*. It’s not just a super-hero strip, and it’s not just a romance strip. It’s both.

RT: It must have the right combination to have kept going for more than two decades.

LIEBER: I think so. And I try to give it whatever I can, and I’ll tell you why—I’ve learned while I’ve been doing it. Going back to when I worked for Shooter, and he wanted full scenes—that forced me to try to grow as an artist. It wasn’t a question of whether I approved of it, or didn’t approve of it; I had to do it. And I had to go back and re-learn perspective. Then, because I was slow, I said, “I’ve got to get faster with this,” whether I was doing *The Hulk* or *Spider-Man*. I said, “How the hell do I get faster?” And one day John Buscema gave a lecture at Marvel Comics on “How to Draw Fast.”

RT: He should know!

LIEBER: So I took notes, and John had a whole bunch of steps. Later I even went out to his house, and he showed me. Well, I don’t know if it helped me to draw *faster*, but it helped me to draw *better*, and to see what mistakes I was making. John said, “This isn’t how you draw—this is how you draw *fast*.” There was a lot in the process that helped me to draw with more substance; it

was just better.

And I had to face things I hadn’t faced as an artist in those years. I’ve been studying. I took up anatomy, I tried to train myself to see three-dimensionally, which I hadn’t been very good at. My construction I felt wasn’t very good, and so on, and so on. I was looking at the work of other artists, not only Buscema, but Kirby and Gil Kane and this one and that one... and it’s been a constant process of learning, which maybe is one reason I can keep doing it. It makes it interesting. I keep trying new methods, and new this and new that... to try to get better. And meanwhile I’ve seen the whole field change, two new generations from the people that I knew.

It’s interesting, because when I look at some of the current art, the characters don’t look like humans to me. The faces look more like designs of faces than faces. Yet, if you take a page by the new artists and put it up against the old artists, the new page looks a lot more alive and interesting, in a way, and the old page looks dull and old-fashioned. To me, it does, at any rate. So it’s an interesting thing; the whole world has changed, and I say, “What am I still drawing for? What am I trying to learn?” It’s all passed me. It’s all gone....

RT: Come on, Larry, we can’t end on that note! Doing something successfully for thirteen years, you must have learned something.

LIEBER: Let’s put it this way: Now, when Stan asks me to draw something new, I don’t get as nervous. I used to say, “Oh my God, how do I draw this! The guy is on the wall, and he’s doing this, and he’s doing that, and he’s carrying Mary Jane, and... how the hell do you...?” And now it’s “I’ll do it! I’ll figure it out!”

RT: Good for you!

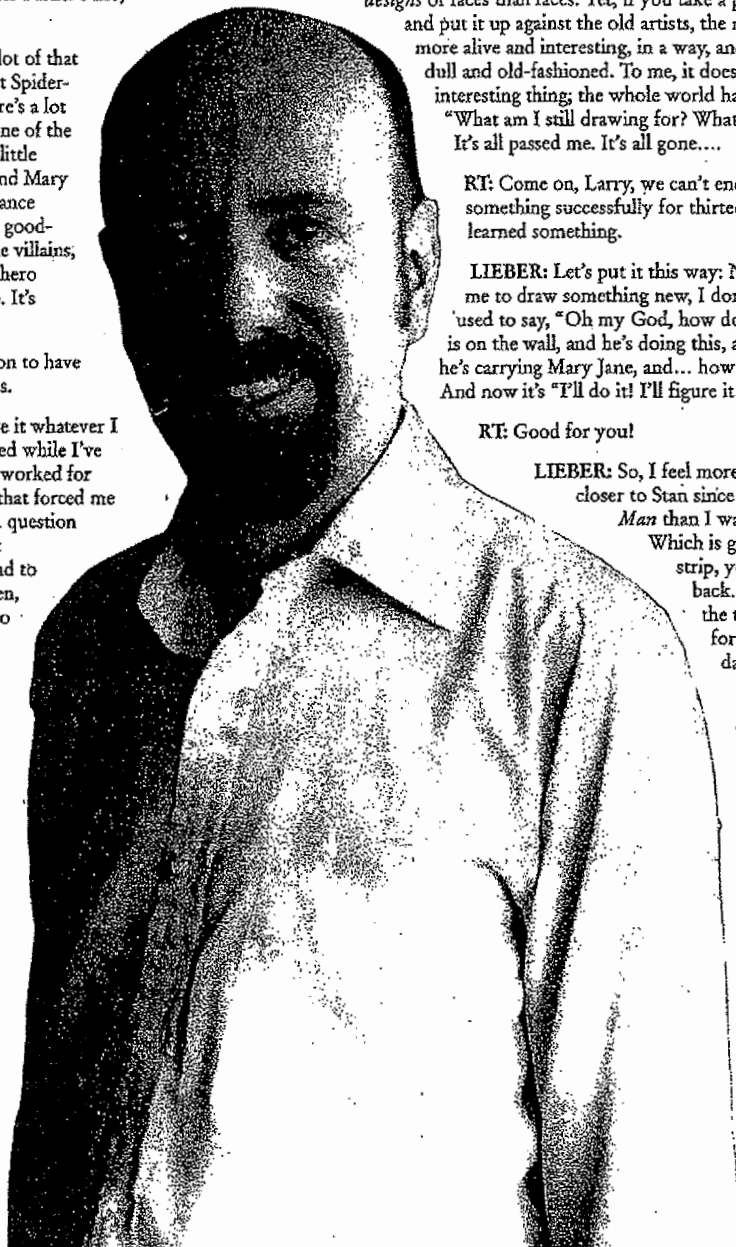
LIEBER: So, I feel more confident. Also, I feel closer to Stan since I’ve been doing *Spider-Man* than I was before, in a way.

Which is good, because doing a strip, you don’t get much feedback. If I get a fan letter, half the time they’re just asking for a sketch or an original daily or a signature.

But Stan is the only one who really looks at my stuff, and if I do anything good, he appreciates it. He’ll look at a strip and say, “Well, I know that must’ve been hard,” or he’ll say, “Gee, that’s a good expression you’ve got on that girl; you ought to be directing movies,” or something like that. It’s been a nice working relationship all these years.

Fin

Larry Lieber in a photo apparently from the '70s, a decade when the writer also became editor-in-chief of the shortlived *Atlas/Seaboard* comics line.



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